The Box Office Girl

BY ARNOLD BENNETT

What Caused Elaine Edar to Choose Her Husband?

"YOU ARE A NATURAL DANCER," HE REMARKED. "YOU HAVE THE GIFT."

THE ROTUNDA ROYAL is the largest music hall in London and the most successful music hall in London, and it burns more electricity than any other place of amusement in London. Its upper parts are glitteringly outlined in green and yellow electricity; its high tower can be glimpsed from all manner of streets, and the rich glow of the whole affair illuminates a cloudy sky for the whole of central London to see.

Though entirely respectable, it has an altar of its own in the hearts of the young and the old bloods of provincial cities who come to town strictly on business. It is the mecca of suburban inhabitants with a dull afternoon in front of them and 10 shillings in their pockets to squander. To have his or her name printed in fire on the facade of the Rotunda is the ambition of every music hall artist in the world, and of many another artist besides. In brief, the Rotunda is a very important, grandiose and impressive organism—an organism which emphatically functions. And it is a household word. Even judges of the high court have heard of the Rotunda. No daily paper in London ever appears without mention of it somewhere.

Now, daily and nightly, behind a counter on your left as you enter by the main entrance into the grand foyer, stood until lately a girl named Elaine Edar. She was a blonde, with bright hair, an attractive, pretty and benevolent face and a good figure, because these attributes were essential to her position. Her simple, smart dress was of black, but it had touches of fantasy and of color, because Mr. Walter King (managing director, risen from call boy, as he openly stated about ten times every day) had said that he did not care for his girls to look like hotel clerks. Elaine's face and hair were known to tens of thousands of people. Often in the street such people would start at the sight of her and murmur something to a companion, and Elaine knew that they were saying:

"That's the box-office girl at the Rotunda."

So that she had a certain importance on earth, and assuredly at the Rotunda. For she gathered in money, and to Mr. Walter King the Rotunda was in the end nothing but a machine for gathering in more money than it paid out.

Not that Elaine was the sole instrument for gathering in money. Far from it! Above her counter were displayed the words: "Box office for this performance only. Boxes. Royal fauteuils. Royal stalls. Stalls. Grand balcony." All advance booking was done in a special office up the street, and each of the unreserved parts of the house had its own entrance, with turnstile and money taker. Still, Elaine took a goodish bit of money twice a day, and she was easily the most prominent of all the human machines that received silver coins and notes in exchange for bits of colored paper or base-metal disks.

Twelve performances a week, and Elaine had to be on duty ten minutes before the doors opened and to remain on duty until one hour before the end of each performance. Then she had to check her money and prove to the cashier's department that the total was correct. An anxious job, especially during the "rush" quarter of an hour, when she had to read with the glance of an eagle the numbers on the "sheet" of the performance, treat every patron as a benefactor, return good for evil, give change like a flash of lightning, detect spurious coins in the tenth of a second and render sweet smiles to louts, curmudgeons and cats.

Happily, she was by nature profoundly and generally benevolent, and in this respect indeed a wonder to her assistant, who did the telephoning and lent a general hand. It was her benevolent air that had recommended her to Mr. Walter King, who had sacked her predecessor for being hoity-toity to patrons whenever business was abnormally good. She was devoted to the theater. Nobody thought of her apart from the theater, and in fact she had little private life. Mr. Walter King was himself passionately devoted to the theater, and he expected all the staff to be passionately devoted to the theater; but whereas his own devotion brought in a large share of the profits, Elaine's devotion brought in only a small fixed salary, which Mr. King did not dream of passionately increasing when business grew fabulous. Elaine saw nothing odd in this arrangement.

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IT was a quarter to 10. The day's work was nearly over. Elaine's assistant had gone. The entrance hall and foyer blazed deserted with their superlavish electricity. When an idle program girl swung open a door at the end of a vast corridor and peeped forth, Elaine could faintly catch the sound of clapping. She rarely got more of a performance than these brief distant rumors of applause. For her the Rotunda was not an auditorium, but a foyer with box office, and the artists were mere names on bills. She estimated the quality of the applause, and glanced at the clock and the time table to know who was being applauded, for she had to be in a position to inform patrons what artist was "on" at any given moment. Then she proceeded with the secret counting of notes on a shelf beneath the counter.

In view of the absence of a grille to protect the counter and of the prevalence of gangs of robbers in London, her situation with all that money for Mr. Walter King might seem perilous. But it was not so in reality. Elaine and her treasure were well guarded by formidable giants and astute dwarfs in the shape of gorgeous doormen and pages. Though he disapproved of grilles, Mr. Walter King took no chances with the night's receipts.

Then a dark and elegant young man in full evening panoply appeared from the street. The guardians saluted him. He saluted Elaine. This unidentified and mysterious gentleman came nearly every night toward 10 o'clock. Elaine guessed that he came to witness the performance of the Russian dancer, the incomparable, illustrious Feodora.

"Did you keep the fauteuil for me, Miss Edar?" He had picked up her name from somewhere, it seemed.

She nodded, kindly smiling. She liked the regular visitant, not in the least because he was regular, but because he was dark, elegant, slim and had a sad, wistful smile. Yes, she had kept the stall for him, despite the fact that if he had not come to claim it she would have had to pay for it out of her own pocket. He usually telephoned just before the rush, and Elaine had accepted the risk of his not coming quite a dozen times.

Occasionally, as tonight, he would try to get a box, and if successful would pay for both the box and the stall. And he would show amazing indecisions. Tonight she had no box to sell; the sole empty seat in the house was the one she had retained for him; and yet, in his rich, low voice, he would keep talking about a box, and also she had to repeat to him several times precisely where the stall was in regard to the stage.

At length he paid, raised his hat again and went off toward the auditorium, followed by her benedictory, sympathetic smile. The head doorman, his pocket gaping for the harvest of sixpences which he would shortly garner for putting patrons into cars and taxis, winked at her rather broadly, as if to indicate that the dark gentleman was queer in the head. But Elaine gently deprecated the wink, seeing in the dark gentleman a victim of hopeless love for a Russian dancer.

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ELAINE had taken out the self-locking steel cash drawer from its niche, detached and hidden the telephone and was about to disappear through the little door behind the counter when Rachel Gordon hurried up, rather breathless, from somewhere.

"I'm the publicity lady," Rachel would introduce herself to the new artists in the wings and in dressing rooms when she wanted material for piquant dress paragraphs. She did all the day-to-day publicity work for the Rotunda. A pretty Jewess, with full lips and eyes, waved hair, striking clothes, carefully tended complexion and a general air of knowing all that was worth knowing; not quite young, but far from old. She spent every evening in the theater, and little in it escaped her attention.

"Feo asked me to give you this note," said she. "I'm so glad I've caught you before you'd gone."

She handed the note, with a characteristic, sparkling glance that was full of chicane and the spirit of plotting. "Feo!" Thus she familiarly referred to the great, the unique Feodora. But, then, she managed to be very friendly with all, and she could be highly useful even to the greatest. As Elaine read the note she showed extreme astonishment. It ran:

"My dear Miss Edar, I give a party tomorrow night at the Fantasy Club, some friends, dancing, fun. Will you come? I do hope. Your obliged Feo."

Indeed, the thing was enough to astonish a box-office girl. "Your obliged." Elaine knew what that referred to. A fortnight earlier, when a not uncommon state of war existed between Feodora and Mr. Walter King, Feodora had been unable to get two free seats for friends. She had most particularly wanted those seats, even if it should be necessary to pay for them. But she was too haughty to tell Mr. King that she would pay for them, and so she had herself run around, furs and pearls and all—as described by Rachel for the press—to implore Elaine to allot seats to her, even though all seats were sold.

And Elaine, by methods known to box-office keepers only, had bestowed upon her the two desired seats, and Mr. Walter King not a penny the wiser! Feodora, in the generosity of her impulsive, poetic heart, had not forgotten.

"Shall you come?" asked Rachel, who evidently knew what was in the scrawled note.

"I—I haven't a rag to wear," answered Elaine, much flustered.

"Oh, stuff!" observed Rachel, simply. "You're always awfully well turned out. Everybody knows that."

"But evening wear——" protested Elaine, despite a secret mistrust of Rachel.

"Oh, stuff!" Rachel repeated.

Elaine could scarcely sleep that night. It was an incredible happening. She rose early to look through her wardrobe.

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THE Fantasy Club, scene of Feodora's party, was in Goodge street, off Tottenham Court road. Elaine had some difficulty in finding it, since its portal was hidden at the end of a long covered passage and showed no signs of festivity, but she found Rachel Gordon in the cloakroom.

Rachel gave the names of sundry high-brow novelists and painters and musicians who regularly frequented the club, and she said that in the art of turning night into day they were the greatest experts in London. Rachel laughed at the nocturnal pretentions of the more famous dancing clubs; she scorned them as bourgeois. Any one could join them; but, according to Rachel, not any one could join the Fantasy. You had to be some one or the approved friend of some one to be admitted to the Fantasy.

The dancing room was large, low and very bare compared to the ornate interiors of the Rotunda. It had no decorations except electric lights in Chinese lanterns, and the costumes of the ladies. These decorations, however, were extremely effective. The room was full. Revelers were eating, drinking, dancing, chattering, laughing and giggling with much gusto.

"There's Feo's table," said Rachel, pointing to the biggest and busiest table in the place, and led Elaine toward it. Elaine was nervous.

"How sweet of you!" the slim and gorgeous Feo greeted her. "How sweet you look! No! It is more than sweet. I understand now when Carly does say how you are exotique. It is so. Yes. Sit down. Have drink? Have chicken? Or soup? Yes. Soup first. Rachel, occupy yourself with Miss." Feodora turned to two young men, who kissed her hand.

Elaine listened eagerly to the confused talk at the table, but, though all laughed or giggled, she heard nothing that struck her as amusing. No doubt the humor was being accomplished in French or Russian, of which languages Elaine had no knowledge. However, all the ladies looked either lovely or strange. She was still very shy, but she was mysteriously happy, too, somehow uplifted.

"Who is Carly?" she murmured to Rachel, and Rachel by a discreet turn of the head indicated a young man who stood behind Feodora, against the wall. Elaine started and flushed. It was the nightly visitant for whom she reserved stalls. The word exotic in the tiny mouth of Feodora had already exercised Elaine, who could not comprehend how anybody could regard her as deserving of such an adjective. That the nightly visitant should deem her exotic, and should have said so to a high goddess like Feodora, almost disturbed her while enchanting her. Rachel beckoned to the nightly visitant, who approached.

"Mr. Lyeskov," said Rachel. "Miss Edar. I think you have met."

She laughed. Mr. Lyeskov blushed.

The next moment Elaine became aware that her hand had been kissed. A unique experience. Hand kissing was, of course, "foreign" and somewhat foolish, but it was surprisingly delicious, even flattering. So this was the young man who, while paying for stalls from which to worship Feodora, had found time to examine herself and to decide that she was exotic. Yes, disturbing! Disturbing!

He now asked her to dance. Could she refuse? How ridiculous! Unfortunately, in the dance she could not think of a single thing to say to him. He was a fine dancer, but scarcely cleverer as a talker than Elaine. They just danced, yielded themselves to the music and the movement. It was exquisite.

"You are a natural dancer. You have the gift," he remarked. She smiled. She knew that she was a natural dancer. She had no more learned to dance than she had learned to breathe; she rarely danced, and only in suburban resorts with one or two dull acquaintances; yet she knew all the steps and never erred, never hesitated. They danced two consecutive dances. As he restored her to the table he asked if he might dance again with her very soon. Feodora called to him.

"How did you get on?" Rachel demanded of Elaine, with a peculiar glance.

"Oh, splendid! He's asked me for another dance."

"And did you refuse?"

"Ought I?"

"Don't be silly. Can't you see he's mad about you? Why do you suppose he comes to get tickets off you every night? Why do you suppose he got Feo to ask you here tonight? And let me tell you, he may be a French-Russian, but he's very serious and very rich. He didn't lose anything in the revolution, he didn't! Pity he's so shy, isn't it?"

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ELAINE'S face burned again. The fact is, she was overwhelmed as she realized bit by bit that "Carly" came nightly to the Rotunda not to worship Feodora, but to worship her. It was staggering. She was glad when a male performer in Feodora's troupe invited her on to the floor. She did not care for his face, nor for his manners, nor yet for his dancing—how different from "Carly's"!—but he enabled her to escape from Rachel Gordon's enigmatic scrutiny. As she went round the room with the professional dancer something happened to her, and she half stumbled and turned wholly pale. It was a night of sensations, blushes and pallors, such a night as she had never before known. The dancer looked at his faltering partner inquiringly, but said no word, and Elaine recovered herself. No one knew, no one could guess, what had happened to her. And after all it was naught.

She had only caught sight of Ned seated at a table with another man, and he had seemed to be somewhat unprosperous and defiant in his shabby evening dress. And he looked older, thinner, worn.

Ned was the one man who had entered into the private life of hers, the existence of which none of the patrons of the Rotunda could visualize. It was six years ago, when she was twenty-one, and before her connection with the life of music halls. Ned was an advertising agent and lots of things besides; he had had a hand in promoting one or two of the earlier dance clubs. He was up one month and down the next. He had defects, but he had made love to her, proposed to her, been accepted. She gave him all her heart; she learnt rapturously to love love. The world became magical. The date of the wedding was fixed.

Then Ned came one day and said that candor was best, and that the sole manly course was to confess to her. What? What? That he had mistaken his feelings. That he had found that he did not care for her "in that way." Whereas he did care for Alice "in that way," and Alice cared for him "in that way." That, of course, he was hers to command, but would it not be better, for her sake and for the sake of them all, if she—he was extremely sorry. He did not and could not defend himself. Alice was a friend of hers, had but a few months before been congratulating her on her betrothal to nice Ned. Ned married Alice. And so that was that.

Elaine's tragic grief softened gradually into vague regret, and vague regret changed into a vague feeling that perhaps she had done well to lose Ned. Such stories lie buried in the memory of numberless girls who go through life apparently as though butter had never melted in their mouths. And you dig up the stories with difficulty, with amazement. Well, she had caught sight of Ned Haltright.

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THE next minute his table was empty. She hoped he had not seen her, and could not help thinking that he had. Undoubtedly she had had a shock. But after powdering herself anew and drinking some champagne, she put her hand once again in the hand of Carly Lyeskov, and felt his right hand lightly on her back and resumed the dance with him; the effects of the shock soon disappeared.

She glimpsed herself in a mirror and was satisfied with the vision. Idle to deny that she was pretty, had a good figure or that her frock was not smart! She was as presentable as most, and more so than a lot of them, though her only trinket was a necklace of Chinese-dyed mother-of-pearl. Carly's worship of her blossomed like a flower. It was heavenly to be worshiped, to be able to confer a favor by merely consenting to exist. She had a sense of dominion which intoxicated. And then the band, the colors, the movement, the feeling of being surrounded by illustrious and witty artists! She wondered who was who! And Carly was so distinguished. His very shirt front was a miracle. And he was so deferential.

"May I ask where you live?"

She told him Fulham.

"I suppose you would not let me drive you home in my car?"

Yes, she would; he was really too kind! Romance! Romance! Soon she was thinking that Carly was unique in the whole world, so sympathetic he was! And he worshiped her. He had gone off his head about her. Triumph! Power! Dizziness! It was silently established between them that they would dance every dance together. And they did. The Fantasy faded to a dim background for their emotions. And Elaine looked with pity at her past life, at the horrid grind and daily work, at her loneliness, because behind her counter she was nearly as lonely as a bus driver, and at home in her rooms she was terribly lonely. How had she supported it? Could she possibly continue to support it?

At 3 o'clock, when the gayety was at its apogee, she said she thought she must go home. Not that she wanted to go home or had any reason for going home. She wanted simply to command him, and to prove to the entire Fantasy Club that he was hers to command.

She took leave of Feodora, who poured over her a delicious cascade of protests. And Carly did drive her to Fulham; Parson's Green it was. No little "liberties" in the large, smooth-gliding car, such as are expected and condoned by the primmest maidens after such ecstasies, in such circumstances, at such an hour. Nothing but the deepest respect. Yes, he was "serious." She leaned forward suddenly and tapped on the window. The car stopped. Mr. Lyeskov sprang to the pavement, handed her out, removed his hat, kissed her hand and was richly rewarded by her smile under the lamp post. He waited until she had found her latchkey and opened her door. Of course it was a poor little suburban house. But she knew that that didn't matter. It was where she lived.

HE DRANK THE HOT TEA, WHICH SEEMED TO REVIVE HIM.

ELAINE went to bed in a state of ecstatic, blissful excitement. No sooner had she laid herself down than she heard the prolonged trill of the front-door bell in the back room. She occupied the two rooms which constituted the third or top floor of the old house. In earlier days she had had only one room, but destiny had been fairly kind to her. The front room was a sort of bed-sitting room; the back was a kitchen-scullery-dining room. The floor was her home and held all that she possessed. Compared to many young and aging women in her situation of life, she was affluent and of luxurious habit. Now, there were four bells on the front door, each labeled. Sometimes, and especially at night, visitors got confused and rang the wrong bell. Elaine thought that on this occasion the wrong bell had been rung.

"They'll have to keep on ringing," she said. After all, the bell did not make a great deal of noise. The bell continued to ring.

"Nobody can possibly be wanting me at this time of night," she said.

Nevertheless, she put on her dressing gown and opened the window and looked forth and down. But she could not see who was ringing because of the wide, leaded caves of the old-fashioned porch. She shut the window and shut out the invading chill of the dark night. At length the persistent bell began to exasperate her fatigued nerves, and with an annoyed, apprehensive shrug she crept step by creaking step all the way downstairs and softly undid the front door.

Ned Haltright was standing in the porch. She gave a start, and instinctively drew the thin peignoir more tightly round her shoulders. As she did so she stiffened, looking at him. She was affronted, angered, by this inexcusable visitation. Nothing but sheer good nature prevented her from shutting the door in Ned's face.

"I saw you at the club——" he commenced.

"Not so loud, please!" she stopped him in a sharp whisper, thinking of her immaculate reputation in the crowded house that so often buzzed with gossip. To have come home at God knows what hour in a car was bad enough, but to receive male callers still later——

"I want to see you. I must talk to you," Ned whispered plaintively.

"Not now," she whispered.

"Yes, now."

She shook her head firmly.

"Fancy coming here now," she whispered, in still colder reproof. "And how on earth did you get here at this time?"

"Walked," he whispered.

"Walked?" she whispered.

"Yes."

He must certainly have walked over six miles. The whispering seemed to render them intimate in spite of her aggrieved attitude toward him. It struck her as strange and affecting that she had once been his affianced sweetheart, that they used to kiss each other with long kisses and that now they were nothing to each other. She made a sign for him to enter. She very cautiously closed the door.

"I'm on the top floor now," she murmured, scarcely audible.

He nodded. The fan light over the door let through the ray of the street lamp, so that the first flight of stairs was fairly plain. The higher flights were dark. But Ned knew the staircase. Ned followed her on tiptoe, and every now and then a stair creaked with a thunderous sound that no prudence of tread could avoid. Elaine had the horrid illusion that behind every door as they passed it women with slanderous tongues were greedily listening.

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AT the summit of the perilous climb she led him into the kitchen-scullery-dining room, and found the matches, lit the gas, lit the gas stove. She put her fingers to her lips. They must still exist and communicate without sound. No sound-proof floors in that house! She motioned him to the wicker easy chair. He sank into it. She looked at him and looked round the room. Happily, the room was very tidy and cosy. He was pale, pathetic, with his pointed, exhausted, weak-charactered features. He wore a blue coat, strapped close at the waist and bulging out above and below over his evening clothes, in his hand he held an ordinary bowler hat. No style! What a contrast with Mr. Lyeskov! He had the air of defeat, even of being a prisoner of war. And he had walked more than six miles in his madness.

Without a word she turned away, lit the gas ring and began to make some tea. She had to do it from simple humanity. And there she was with him, sharing surreptitiously the room with him. Their tender intimacy emerged toward them out of the past, indestructible. Somehow, what had been, still was. How could she treat him as a stranger? She could not. Moreover, she felt far superior to him in moral force; she felt, despite her resentment, almost protective in a casual, condescending way. She had the adoration of Carly Lyeskov at her back.

"Well?" she whispered.

Ned gazed at the rug under his feet. Silence. Hiss of the gas stove; hiss of the gas rings; fizzing of the blue-yellow gas jet within its mantle.

"Well, how's Alice?" she whisperingly, in a rather indifferent, half-quizzing tone, as if saying: "Well, you got your Alice. How does it work now you've had her six years?"

He whispered solemnly:

"Poor Alice died two years ago, and the baby's two years old. Hadn't you heard?"

She shook her head. She could not speak; her throat was suddenly constricted; tears glittered in her eyes. At length she said:

"I'm sorry to hear it." How poor the words! Then, after a pause, while Ned stared at the inside of his hat, "Is it a girl or a boy?"

"A girl."

"What have you called her?"

"Alice."

"And how do you manage about the poor little thing?"

"Ah! That's the trouble. How do I manage?" He looked up suddenly, and he was crying.

"Ellie"—nobody else had ever called her "Ellie"—"Ellie, I made a frightful mistake when I broke it off with you, and I've known it for years. And then when I saw you tonight—it was too much for me. Yes. I had to talk to you." His whispered utterance was so obscure and feeble that she had to guess what he said; but she guessed right. The water boiled. She turned from him again to fill the teapot.

How weak he was! So impulsive! But so enterprising, too! Full of initiative, as usual! He had had the wild idea of coming to her, and he had come. He had arrived. He had wanted to talk to her, and he was talking to her.

"And how's business?" she asked, extinguishing the gas ring. She was bound to say something—and something ordinary, banal, off the point.

"Oh, pretty fair," he whispered. "Not bad. Changeable, of course. But you rub along, you know."

She was confirmed in her notion that he was out of luck. He drank the hot tea, which seemed to revive him; he was a man easy to revive and easy to deject. She took some tea herself. As an afterthought she cut some bread and butter. He ate it savagely. The scene was domestic. The night, the enforced whispering, his trouble, the informality of the little meal made it domestic. She stood near the fire in order to keep warm in her thin raiment.

"Ellie," he said, rising vivaciously to put his cup and saucer on the table, and standing near to her. "I've always been in love with you. I know there's no excuse for me. I didn't treat you right. But there it is. And when I saw you tonight——" He had raised his voice.

"Hsh!" she warned him.

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SHE spoke gently, keeping resentment out of her voice, partly because she was flattered by the realization of her power over him—and she had the same power over Carly Lyeskov—and partly because he was so wistful and she pitied him in his unhappiness. Nevertheless, in her heart she was indignant.

She did not see Elaine Edar abandoning her independent situation for the status of the wife of a Ned Haltright, asking Ned Haltright for money when she needed it, considering his wishes in regard to her own conduct, sacrificing herself to the baby of the girl who had supplanted her, sharing the material vicissitudes which must inevitably result from his character. He might love her, admire her, but that could not compensate. Moreover, the whole idea was absurd, monstrous. His suggestion amounted to effrontery. And Carly Lyeskov existed and worshiped. However, she offered no reasoned reply. Her daily traffic with all sorts of human beings had taught her when to argue and when not to argue.

"Please don't say any more," she murmured firmly. "You can't burst out like this."

"But I've had it on my mind for years, I tell you."

"Please don't say any more."

He seemed to wither.

"I'll go. Better go. Sorry I spoke."

The wicker easy chair, empty, complained with creakings of the burden which it had had to bear. The dawn began delicately to announce itself in silver-gray gleams through the interstice between the curtains of the window.

"You mustn't go yet," Elaine whispered.

"Why not?"

"Because it's getting light, and the people on the first floor will be about and I can't have a man, specially in evening dress, leaving my rooms at this time. Besides, there's no buses or trams yet. You must wait till every one's up and people have begun to go up and down stairs, and you must cover up your shirt front properly. Then you can slip out." She whispered soberly, with the sagacity of a young woman who has learnt her world. She added: "I shall lie down." I'm frightfully tired, and you must be, too. Try to sleep in the chair."

She left him for the front room, and locked the door and dropped on her bed. She was indeed exhausted, but she could not sleep. Her eyes burned. She reflected that dancers were still dancing at the Fantasy. Then she slept.

When she woke the alarm clock, which never alarmed, showed the hour of 10. The memory of the night gradually re-established itself in her mind. How fortunate that her charwoman came only at 11:30! She thought gladly: "Yesterday it was the day after tomorrow that I was to see Carly. Now it is tomorrow. Tea at the Regent Palace at 5." It was she who had chosen the Regent Palace. She arose, washed, dressed deliberately, gave particular attention to the toilet of her face. Cautiously she unlocked her door and cautiously went into the back room. Ned was fast asleep, in a twisted, uncomfortable posture in the wicker chair. His pallid face had the pathos of a corpse. He appeared tragically defenseless, so much so that she could have cried at the sight of him and at the thought of his weaknesses, his perils, his incompetency to deal with the responsibilities attached to little Alice, the baby. Much gas had been burned, but she did not care. She drew the curtains back, and the entire room became pathetic—the teacups, the teapot, crumbs on the floor. The image of Carly Lyeskov was obscured in her soul. She turned off the gas jet. Ned awoke with a jump.

"You're all dressed. Shall I go now?"

"Where's little Alice?"

"She's with some people in Canonbury."

"Who are they? Relations?"

"No. Not relations. I'm not strong in relations. You know that. I think they're very decent people. She seems to be pretty well looked after."

"Oh, Ned! You must give me the address. I'll go and see her tomorrow morning. I'll have a look at things a bit."

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THE images of Carly Lyeskov, automobiles, luxury, distinction, worship, adoration, passion, eternal romance, begun to slip away from her. She clutched at them, drew them back, held them fast, hugged them, but the next moment they were wriggling away again like eels.

"Oh, Ellie! There's nobody like you, and there never was. You're an angel and nothing else."

She wept. She let the tears fall, drop, drop; they slipped down her cheeks and fell into space. Perhaps she was sorry as much for herself as for little Alice and little Alice's father. She saw vistas of effort, struggle, reverses, obstinate recommencings, narrownesses, dependence, despairs, fluttering hopes, quarrels, reconciliations, disillusions and illusions. People would cease to stare at her in the streets of the West End because she would never be in the West End. She would be withdrawn from the vast world of pleasure and excitement and electricity, where tinted statues of nymphs supported heavily carved ceilings on their frail shoulders. Yet an immense peace took possession of her disturbed soul and stilled it.

"This is my fate," she thought. "I was born for it. I wasn't really born for the other thing."

The immense peace in her was

(Continued on Seventh Page.)